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ABSTRACT

Noting that children today are growing up in a "media saturated" world in which mass media, including the Internet, have a commanding presence in daily life, this Digest argues that it is imperative for educators to teach what M. Megee (1997) calls "the new basic"--media literacy--so that learners can be producers of effective media messages as well as critical consumers of ideas and information. It discusses what media literacy is, understanding media messages, identifying stereotypes and biases, reading beyond realism, and understanding audiences. It concludes with possible learning activities and Web site addresses of three media literacy organizations. (RS)

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D152

Media Literacy

by Mardziah Hayati Abdullah

Children today are growing up in what O'Sullivan, Dutton and Rayner (1998) call a "media saturated" world, in which mass media, including the Internet, have a commanding presence in daily life. Media messages exert such powerful "social, emotional and intellectual influences" (Hepburn, 1999) that it is important to develop a society which understands how media can both serve and deceive. It is thus imperative for educators to teach what Megee (1997) calls "the new basic"- *media literacy* - so that learners can be producers of effective media messages as well as "critical consumers of ideas and information" (Rafferty, 1999).

What is media literacy?

Based on definitions provided by conferees at the Annenberg School for Communication (cited in Megee, 1997) and by the Canadian Ministry of Education, media literacy (ML) may be thought of as the ability to critically understand, question and evaluate how media work and produce meaning, how they are organized, how they mediate and construct reality, and how they impact our lives. ML may include the ability to create media products.

Fulton (1998) discusses technology-related competencies and curriculum standards defined by various states that may be applied to ML education. Among the six "essential learnings" Illinois desires for its students are the ability to seek and navigate information, to communicate effectively using appropriate technology, and to be responsible citizens in a technological age. Thus, in addition to teaching the technical aspects of handling various media equipment, ML is concerned with helping learners become informed users of media messages.

Understanding media messages

Most people involved in ML share the premise that media are used for specific purposes, including commercial concerns. Media messages thus embody values and ideologies (Hoffmann and Johnson, 1998), and although media texts are theoretically polysemic (open to various interpretations), producers employ various techniques or codes to draw audiences to the *preferred meanings* of texts (O'Sullivan, et al., 1998). For example, product comparisons are commonly used to persuade consumers that one brand of product is superior to another.

McMahon and Quinn (in O'Sullivan, et al.) identify three categories of codes that may be used to convey meanings in media messages: *technical* codes, which include camera techniques, framing, depth of field, lighting and exposure and juxtaposition; *symbolic* codes, which refer to objects, setting, body language, clothing and color; and *written* codes in the form of headlines, captions, speech bubbles and language style. For instance, a journalist aiming at readers' sympathy for an imprisoned political activist may choose to publish a photograph of the activist, crouched behind bars, next to a picture of a caged animal (making use of body language, setting, and juxtaposition) and anchor the picture to a caption that reads "CAGED!" Helping learners understand how codes are used to create desired effects is an essential component of ML education.

Identifying stereotypes and biases

Media representation of reality may "inform, reinforce or challenge" stereotypes and biases that exist in society. For instance, the image of the dumb blonde (associated with characteristics such as seductive behavior, strong make-up, sexy dresses, naivety, giggling, and illogical thinking) has been propagated through movies, and although women are increasingly being featured as tough, independent individuals, commercials still tend to portray female characters in decorative and domestic roles (O'Sullivan, et al., 1998). ML education thus needs to help learners explore the extent to which media help construct "artificial definitions of masculinity and femininity" (Graydon, 1997). Racial stereotypes pose another challenge. Racism is often masked, such as in television programs that feature ethnic minority characters in solely humorous or exotic roles, in commercials that sell skin-whitening beauty products, and in the frequent portrayal of minority groups as social problems (O'Sullivan, et al., 1998).

Reading beyond realism

Media *mediate* reality via the use of recognized codes and conventions, and the credibility or *realism* of a media text may be judged by the degree to which the audience identifies with what is being portrayed. For example, appropriate setting, clothes and props determine the *surface realism* of a drama, while credible acting adds to its *plausibility*, and suitable music

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enhances the mood. However, what is 'real' is culturally situated and subjective (O'Sullivan, et al., 1998). Crowds at a soccer match may thus appear either rowdy and unruly or excited and ardent, depending on the narration and the visual evidence presented. Mediated reality can therefore be controversial. Nevertheless, O'Sullivan, et al. note that audiences generally accord a great degree of credibility to broadcast news and documentaries, perceiving the reporting to be objective and accurate. Documentaries, in particular, are considered reliable because of visual evidence, location shots, the fly-on-the-wall approach (recording the reality of everyday life without structured direction), interviews with experts and ordinary people, and "seamless editing." In reality, however, these techniques disguise values and ideologies that determine the editorial choices involved in the making of these media messages, and ML education needs to sensitize learners to the underlying intentions of producers.

Understanding audiences

ML is also concerned with teaching learners how media cater to different audiences. Understanding audience needs helps producers decide on the content and delivery of messages. Blumler and Katz, in their 1974 study (cited in O'Sullivan, et al., 1998), found that watching television fulfilled four needs: it was a form of escapism or diversion from everyday pressures, a basis for socializing with other viewers, a channel for exploring personal problems by identifying with certain characters, and a source of information about real-world events. This list - which should include educational needs that are relevant to today's society - is useful for thinking about audiences of other media forms as well. Writing articles for newspapers and magazines also requires a sense of who the readers will be. For example, the headlines and first paragraph of a news article have to contain information about the *what, when, where, who,* and *how* of an event to provide the gist of a story for busy readers.

Possible learning activities

ML involves interpreting media messages (creating personal meaning from codes and conventions) as well as thinking critically about then (Rafferty, 1999). Thus, an *infusion approach*, which immerses teaching critical thinking within teaching the content knowledge of ML (Feuerstein, 1999), may be useful. Thoman (1999) identifies five critical-thinking questions that learners can ask specifically about media messages:

- Who created this message and why?
- What techniques are used to hold my attention?
- What lifestyles, values and points of view are represented?
- How might different people interpret this message?
- What is omitted from this message?

Learners can conduct interviews and short surveys to obtain information on audience needs and preferences. In addition, Hepburn (1999) suggests getting learners to keep personal logs about programs that appeal to specific age groups, and to study prime viewing times and media ratings (using resources such as the Nielsen report on television viewers).

To further develop critical awareness, learners can be asked to practice distinguishing fact from fiction in selected television shows, and to review advertisements found in various media forms, as suggested by Hepburn. Graydon (1997) encourages learners to study the portrayal of images, such as male-female images, by physically imitating the ways in which men and women are positioned in fashion features, describing how the poses make them feel, and noting consistent differences. O'Sullivan, et al. (1998) advocates student research on the same subject, such as studying the proportion of men and women appearing in commercials and the roles they portray.

The more learners are involved in ML activities, the more likely they are to become informed and empowered users and consumers of media. The following Web sites provide further information on Media Literacy:

The Center for Media Literacy
http://www.medialit.org

The Media Literacy Online Project
http://interact.uoregon.edu/MediaLit/HomePage

Media Awareness Network
http://www.media-awareness.ca./eng/

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